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Trends. History and the Consequences of Political Boundaries in Africa

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One very common "truth" about Africa is that much of its military, politico-military, political, and economic conflict stems from arbitrary or inappropriate political boundaries effected by the European colonial powers. These boundaries allegedly segmented "naturally occurring" ethnic groups and tribes and threw together different groups and tribes--all in a conflictogenic manner. This "truth" has an attractive or unattractive feature--depending on one's political persuasion--of attributing blame away from the perpetrators of conflict as well as those caught up in such conflict.

As opposed to arguing about the validity of this received truth or the amounts of variance to be attributed to political boundaries versus other variables, one might note that boundaries are as much consequences as causes. Moreover, political boundaries can nurture the development of groups as opposed to only containing existing groups or segmenting them. As well, the colonial-mandated boundaries partially reflected political threats to colonial power and even helped nurture political opposition to colonial power. These observations should change received truth to an inherited narrative that only serves the needs of its purveyors. (See Coover, G. E., & Godbold, L. C. (1998). Convergence between racial and political identities: Boundary erasure or aversive racism? *Communication Research*, 25, 669-688; Fardon, R. (1988). *Raiders & refugees: Trends in Chamba political development 1750 to 1950*. Washington, DC, USA: Smithsonian Institution Press; Fearon, J.D. (April 20, 2000). Other African lessons. *The New York Times*, p. A28; Gullestad, M. (1997). A passion for boundaries: Reflections on connections between the everyday lives of children and discourses on the nation in contemporary Norway. *Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research*, 4, 19-42; Michael, S. O., & Michael, Y.A. (1998). Multiculturalism in the context of Africa: The case of Nigeria. In K. Cushner, (Ed.). *International perspectives on intercultural education*. (pp. 186-208). Mahwah, NJ, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.; Phillips, T.L. (1996). Symbolic boundaries and national identity in Australia. *British Journal of Sociology*, 47, 113-134.) (Keywords: Africa, Political Boundaries.)